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AUTHOR Farrar, Ronald T.
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ABSTRACT

In 1987, the Graduate Council of the College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of South Carolina developed competency standards--specific statements of competencies that students should possess, and strategies for measuring them--for students in the graduate program. Created as part of a graduate curricular review, this statement presents the following list of competencies (including comments and evaluation suggestions for each competency): (1) effective writing skills; (2) an understanding of basic communications research methods; (3) a working knowledge of communications law; (4) a working knowledge of communications history; (5) basic technological competence; (6) effective communicator skills; (7) professional competence in a specialized area; (8) an understanding of the international dimensions of the field; (9) an understanding of the media as social institutions; (10) a working knowledge of media economics; and (11) an understanding of professional ethics and ethical issues. Competencies for a master of arts degree from the university of South Carolina consist of effective writing skills; a thorough knowledge of basic quantitative research methods; a working knowledge of communications law and basic legal research techniques; a working knowledge of communications history and basic historical research methods; basic technological competence; effective communicator skills; an understanding of the international dimensions of the field; an understanding of the media as social institutions; an understanding of professional ethics and ethical issues; and an understanding of communication theory. (MM)

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COMPETENCIES FOR OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT IN MASS COMMUNICATIONS GRADUATE EDUCATION: THE SOUTH CAROLINA EXPERIMENT

by

Ronald T. Farrar,

University of South Carolina

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By Ronald T. Farrar*

The first American ever to set forth standards of journalistic competency was, arguably, at least, Benjamin Franklin. In the premier issue of his Pennsylvania Gazette, the self-assured young editor explained that a journalist should

> . . . be qualified with an extensive acquaintance with languages, a great easiness and command of writing and relating things clearly and intelligibly and in few words; he should be able to speak of war both by land and sea; be well acquainted with geography, with the history of the time, with the several interests of princes and states, the secrets of courts, and the manners and customs of all nations. 1

Nearly two centuries later, the newly-installed president of the University of Missouri, A. Ross Hill, outlined his expectations and his hopes for journalism education. In brief, eloquent dedicatory remarks, Dr. Hill ventured that the world's first school of journalism should be able:

> . . . to give dignity to the profession of journalism, to anticipate to some extent the difficulties that journalism must meet and to prepare its graduates to overcome them; to give prospective journalists a professional spirit and high ideals of service; to discover those with real talent for the work in the profession, and to discourage those who are likely to prove failures in the profession,and to give the State

better newspapers and a better citizenship. 2

Some 97 students enrolled in the first class in the Missouri School of Journalism that September of 1908. 3 In the autumn of 1986, there were 88,661 students majoring in journalism and mass communications 4--in the 180 schools and colleges that reported in the discipline's annual census; the actual total is far larger. While the basic goals of education for mass communication have been discussed at considerable length over the years 5 , remarkably few specific statements of objectives appear to exist. We seem reluctant to spell out what we as faculty think a student who completes our program should be able to do.

The relatively rarity of such statements does not necessarily mean that we who work with students have no idea as to what we are about. To the contrary, most of us know, or believe we know, what we are shooting for each time we deal with a student paper, exam, writing project, thesis, whatever--but perhaps we don't talk much about these matters for fear of sounding pretentious or sanctimonious. (It might be almost like discussing one's beliefs about God; many of us have such beliefs, but prefer to keep them more or less private.)

But there may be merit in drafting such statements nevertheless. Given the national concern with accountability for educational investments at all levels,6 we might be well advised to set forth clear and specific statements of competencies our graduates should possess--along with suggestions as to how these competencies might be evaluated--for the benefit of our students, ourselves, and those who are asked to fund our educational enterprises.

As a modest first step toward that end, the Graduate Council of the College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of South Carolina in 1987 developed competency standards, and strategies for measuring them, for students in the graduate program. Done as part of a graduate curricular review, this competency statement details minimum criteria that seem realistic and attainable, standards to help assure that the graduates remain fully competitive with those of the better schools of journalism and mass communications throughout the country.

(The College offers two master's degree programs. The Master of Mass Communications degree is elected primarily by students who plan to pursue media-related careers. The Master of Arts degree is usually preferred by students more interested in teaching and research. Though such generalizations are chancy, the MMC program is described as more professional, the MA as more academic. There is a fair amount of overlap. MMC students are required to do slightly more course work and to complete a professional project; MA graduates must do a thesis. In the Fall of 1987 a total of 103 graduate students were enrolled in course work, about two-thirds of them in the MMC program.)

Here is the competencies statement, as it was approved by the faculty in the spring of 1987:

* * *

COMPETENCIES THAT A MASTER OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS DEGREE HOLDER FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA SHOULD POSSESS:

I. EFFECTIVE WRITING SKILLS.

Comment: The graduate must be able to write clear and correct English. Beyond mechanical competence, the writing should reflect intelligent application of such concepts as diction, economy, syntax, sentence and paragraph structure, transition, organization, tempo, capturing color, lending credbiliity, and creating interest. The graduate must demonstrate an ability to present complex ideas in human, identifiable terms.

Measurement: In addition to the creative project, the MMC candidate should, at some point during the graduate program, produce a meaningful manuscript of professional, publishable quality. For a News-Editorial major, that might be a three-part reporting series; for an Advertising-Public Relations major, a 20-page analysis of a marketing or promotional problem; for a Broadcast major, a usable script for a newscast, documentary, or other type of program.

Moreover, it is assumed that seminar papers will be required, that they will be rigorously critiqued, and that any graduate student who does not produce consistently good quality written work will be expected to improve to an acceptable level or face dismissal from the program.

II. AN UNDERSTANDING OF BASIC COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH METHODS.

Comment: While the MMC is a professional degree, any student

who completes the program here should possess a working knowledge of surveys, polls, and samples and be able to organize and conduct actual rudimentary research exercises, such as basic market research and audience measurement studies. This assumes a practical understanding of basic statistical concepts. The student should be familiar with and understand current mass communications research studies as reported in the Journalism Quarterly, Public Opinion Quarterly, and other scholarly publications serving our discipline. In addition, the graduate should possess sufficient knowledge to utilize, from a position of journalistic leadership, the expertise of specialists in the field, whether their approach is historical, experimental, a field study, a survey, or content analysis.

Measurement: Comprehensive examination.

III. A WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF COMMUNICATIONS LAW.

Comment: Current trends and interpretations affecting libel, the First Amendment, privacy, access to public information, broadcast and advertising regulation, obscenity, anti-trust legislation and decisions, copyright, and related matters. An understanding of the philosophical considerations--regarding censorship, the effect of governmental regulatory agencies in such areas as commercial speech and television and radio licensing, defamation, and individual and societal rights--will be expected, not just memorization of tedious legal details.

Measurement: Examination.

IV. A WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF COMMUNICATIONS HISTORY.

Comment: The graduate should be able to appreciate lessons from mistakes and successes of past journalists (as well as leaders in the advertising and public relations field and in broadcasting) who have shaped the discipline. The graduate should be able to discuss evolutionary trends as well as the historical implications of specific topics, such as financing of the media, personnel developments, technological change, ownership patterns, and, especially, press and broadcast freedoms.

Measurement: Examination.

V. BASIC TECHNOLOGICAL COMPETENCE.

Comment: The News-Editorial major should be able to write and edit effectively, using equipment normally found in today's electronic newsroom. The Broadcast graduate should be able to use cameras and tape editing equipment. The Advertising-Public Relations graduate should be able to, say, develop a media plan using market and media information contained in an electronic data base.

Measurement: Ascertainment by Director of Graduate Studies after consultation with faculty in appropriate sequence.

VI. EFFECTIVE SKILLS AS A COMMUNICATOR.

Comment: Each graduate should possess reasonable skills in gathering, organizing, and presenting information. Effective interviewing ability should be expected of all graduates. Effectiveness in oral presentational skills should be required of all graduates in Ad-PR and Broadcast sequences.

Measurement: Final project, and especially the oral defense of it. In addition, the Director of Graduate Studies, after consultation with appropriate faculty, should review each graduate student's file each semester, so that problem cases can be identified and remedial work begun quickly.

VII. PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE IN A SPECIALIZED AREA.

Comment: Each graduate student in the MMC program should elect one area of specialization and demonstrate professional competence in it. If the student chooses science writing, for example, then he or she might satisfy this standard by producing a three-part newspaper series, of publishable quality, dealing with a significant science subject. A governmental affairs writer could produce a three-part series on a contemporary political or governmental matter. Someone in

Advertising might produce a complete, professionally acceptable creative campaign or media plan, while a Broadcasting major might produce a mini-documentary.

Measurement: Evaluation by a faculty committee and/or a committee composed of practicing professionals.

VIII. AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF THE FIELD.

Comment: A graduate of this program, who is presumably preparing for a position of leadership, should possess an understanding of, and familiarity with, what is happening in the field around the world. The News-Editorial major, as an example, must not be ignorant of the sweeping implications of the proposed New World Information Order. The Ad-PR major should be able to discuss international marketing trends; the broadcast major should know something about global television and radio systems.

Measurement: Examination.

IX. AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE MEDIA AS SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS.

Comment: The student should be able to relate the media of mass communications to politics, culture, and society in general. Some knowledge of attitude formation and public opinion formation should be expected. The student, through seminars and, especially, through reading the professional

press, should be competent to discuss such controversial matters as violence on television, freedom to advertise vs. consumer rights and expectations, the impact of newspaper chain ownership on intellectual freedom, and so on. The graduate should also be aware of trends in minority recruitment and retention, stereotypes of women and minority groups, the media's obligations to the community, other pertinent issues.

Measurement: Examination.

X. A WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF MEDIA ECONOMICS.

Comment: This involves a good understanding of media resources (advertising and subscription income, plus revenue from other sources) and how these resources are allocated. The graduate should possess some familiarity with current media accounting practices, the economics of chain ownership, network and cable economic problems, and the like. Contemporary media management practices should also be understood.

Measurement: Examination. Those who elect media management as an area of specialization would presumably be evaluated also on the basis of their performance as management interns.

XI. AN UNDERSTANDING OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND ETHICAL ISSUES.

Comment: The Advertising-PR major should be familiar with

the 4A's Creative Code as well as other pertinent ethical statements in the field. The PR major should, additionally, be fully familiar with PRSA and IABC accreditation guidelines and procedures. The News-Editorial major should be familiar with the ASNE and SDX,SPJ codes. All graduates should be competent to write knowingly about current ethical issues, such as conflicts of interest, sensationalism, misleading advertising, perpetuation of sexist and racist stereotypes in the media, relationships with news sources, and the like. The purpose here is not to impose a single, official ethical code of conduct on any student, but to require the student to think through, and take an individual position on, contemporary ethical problems and to begin developing a personal philosophy of professional behavior.

Measurement: Examination, with questions especially designed to probe the candidate's awareness of ethical controversies reported in the professional and trade press.

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COMPETENCIES THAT A MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE HOLDER FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA SHOULD POSSESS:

I. EFFECTIVE WRITING SKILLS.

Comment: Same as for MMC.

Measurement: Acceptability of thesis; literary quality of seminar papers and essay examinations. As with the MMC candidate, the graduate student in the MA program who does not produce consistently good written work will be expected to improve to a competent level or face dismissal.

II. A THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE OF BASIC QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS.

Comment: The MA student should be familiar with research techniques in such areas as audience analysis, ability of the media to transmit information, channel interaction, consistency theories, uses and gratifications involved in audience behavior, process and effects of mass communications, attitude formation and change, agenda setting, diffusion of information, and techniques such as content analysis by which messages are studied. The student must demonstrate the ability to plan and carry out an independent quantitative research project.

Measurement: Acceptability of project; comprehensive examination.

III. A WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF COMMUNICATIONS LAW AND BASIC LEGAL RESEARCH TECHNIQUES.

Comment: In addition to demonstrating a knowledge of current trends and interpretations affecting libel, freedom of

information, privacy, broadcast regulation, advertising regulation, and other pertinent areas of media law, the MA student must complete at least one research project reflecting a working understanding of legal bibliography--the cases, administrative regulations, review articles, and other resources (printed and housed in electronic data bases) available in a good law library.

Measurement: Satisfactory completion of seminar in communications law; comprehensive examination.

IV. A WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF COMMUNICATIONS HISTORY AND BASIC HISTORICAL RESEARCH METHODS.

Comment: In addition to showing a basic grasp of media history (as defined in IV of the MMC competencies), the MA candidate must be able to present one or more papers requiring use of primary and/or secondary sources of the kind found in an archive or a good university library. This work should reflect the student's knowledge, judgment, and skill in analyzing and reporting on a matter of import in journalism history.

Measurement: Satisfactory completion of seminar in communications history; comprehensive examination.

V. BASIC TECHNOLOGICAL COMPETENCE.

Comment: Same as for MMC.

VI. EFFECTIVE SKILLS AS A COMMUNICATOR.

Comment: Same as for MMC. Defense of the MA thesis would be an important part of the measurement for this standard.

VII. AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF THE FIELD.

Comment: Same as for MMC.

VIII. AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE MEDIA AS SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS.

Comment: Same as for MMC.

IX. AN UNDERSTANDING OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND ETHICAL ISSUES.

Comment: Same as for MMC.

X. AN UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNICATION THEORY.

Comment: General familiarity with seminal and contemporary scholarship involving major communications theories.

Measurement: Examination.

* * *

These competencies do not describe a Media Superman (or Superwoman); instead, they simply reflect one faculty's highly preliminary notion of the skills and attainments the holder of a master's degree in journalism/mass communications should possess. Other, and quite possibly better and more nearly complete, statements might well be forthcoming from other quarters. We hope so. This does not mean that all students in our discipline must be produced from the same mold--or from any mold, for that matter. It does suggest that we might develop better curricula and better teaching if we define with some precision what we are attempting to do, and how we intend to monitor our progress along the way.

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Notes

* The author, director of graduate studies in the College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of South Carolina, is indebted to faculty colleagues, particularly Dr. Robert Jones, chairman of the Graduate Council, and Dr. Perry Ashley, Associate Dean, who helped develop these ideas and were instrumental in gaining faculty approval for them.

1 Pennsylvania Gazette: Containing the Freshest Advices, Foreign and Domestick, Philadelphia, October 2, 1729.

Quoted in Frank Luther Mott, American Journalism, 1690-1960 (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1962), p. 28.

2 Quoted in Sara Lockwood Williams, Twenty Years of Education for Journalism (Columbia, Mo.: E. W. Stephens Publishing Co., 1929), p. 25.

3 ibid., p. 29.

4 Paul V. Peterson, "Enrollment Up 7 Percent in '86, Outstripping University Growth," Journalism Educator 42:1 (1987), p. 4.

5 See especially Planning for Curricular Change: A Report on the Project on the Future of Journalism and Mass Communications Education, published by the School of Journalism, University of Oregon, May, 1984.

6 See especially A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century (New York: The Carnegie Foundation, 1985). In 1985 Arkansas became the first state to administer basic competency tests to public school teachers. Texas followed in 1986. Several other states have since announced plans to do likewise. Numerous media related organizations routinely submit job applicants to competency tests, of course. Some journalism professors, in fact, predict that extensive, well-designed examinations such as those administered to prospective employees by the Knight-Ridder Company, might one day become, de facto, a kind of national competency test for journalism school graduates.

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